

Committee on Resources

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Congressman Greg Walden

Forest & Forest Health Oversight Hearing
Developing Biomass Potential: Turning Hazardous Fuels into Valuable Products
June 23, 2004
1334 Longworth House Office Building

As hundreds of sawmills closed in recent years due to the shut down of the federal timber sale program, many lamented, including myself, at the loss of jobs and the debilitating impacts to the economies of local communities. As early as the 80s' some scientists and forest managers began warning of another impending crisis resulting from these closures---the loss of infrastructure and markets for treating, and funding the treatment of, millions of acres of hazardous fuels. This admonition has already turned into reality. Many regions, as a consequence of losing local sawmills also lost a well-trained and experienced workforce; equipment operators, loggers, truckers and millworkers, not to mention the technology and infrastructure that these workers operated and managed. Now, many communities have no alternative but to landfill or burn the timber and brush that they are removing in order to protect their communities---materials that could otherwise have been sold to help them offset the costs of treating local forests. With 190 million acres of federal lands at high risk of catastrophic fire, this is a serious concern.

The primary purpose of today's hearing is to discuss issues surrounding the rebuilding of a viable infrastructure, and to address a number of questions, such as:

- What technologies and markets currently exist for the use of woody biomass and are they commercially viable?
- Have state or local governments promoted the use of biomass through subsidies, tax deductions or credits, loan guarantees, or other means, and how effective have they been?
- What technological, geographic, economic or other obstacles exist for use and expansion of biomass?
- What steps are federal agencies taking to expand the use of biomass?

With the recent passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, and the vast amounts of woody material that are likely to be generated, the answers to these questions are even more urgent. Ultimately, the successful implementation of HFRA will require broad development of new industries and a rebuilding of traditional ones, if our forests and communities are to remain viable and healthy.

To help us address this important issue, we are fortunate today to have a number of expert witnesses. With their insight, I hope we can begin to lay the groundwork for bipartisan Congressional action on biomass utilization.